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A review of the Least Nighthawk *Chordeiles pusillus*

by Robert W. Dickerman

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The Least Nighthawk *Chordeiles pusillus*, is poorly represented in ornithological collections in North America, except for the large type series of the subspecies *esmeraldae*. References in the literature to the species are mostly limited to the brief original descriptions of the several subspecies. While identifying a recently collected specimen from San Carlos de Rio Negro in southwestern Venezuela, I examined the specimens in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), and sought additional material from other collections. The following is a brief review of geographic variation in the species.

Six subspecies of *Chordeiles pusillus* are recognized, including 2 described since Peters (1945) and 2 newly described here. The subspecies are here arranged geographically from north to south (Fig. 1). Because of the small number of specimens available and the small difference in size between the sexes, measurements of males and females were combined for subspecies represented by fewer than 9 specimens. Capitalized colour names with numbers indicate direct comparison with Smithe's "Naturalists' Color Guide" (1975, 1981).



Figure 1. Distribution in northern South America of *Chordeiles pusillus*, including 2 new subspecies, *xerophilus* and *novaesi*. Stars represent type localities.

Chordeiles pusillus septentrionalis

Chordeiles pusillus septentrionalis Hellmayr, 1908, *Nov. Zool.* 15: 78. (Maipures, Rio Orinoco, "Venezuela" [= Colombia], see below.)

Diagnosis. Similar to nominate *pusillus* but smaller (Table 1); more finely barred ventrally than other subspecies, with undertail coverts white and without barring. Finely vermiculated above, with smaller black areas, especially on the crown, than *esmeraldae*; much less deeply coloured than *saturatus*; darker than the Parahyba population (*xerophilus*), and less reddish than the Marauhao population (*novaesi*), both newly described below.

Range. Eastern Colombia at the type locality on the Rio Orinoco, east through central Venezuela to Guyana, and probably south through Surinam and French Guiana (from whence there are no records to date) probably to Amapa (see below).

Discussion. Two specimens in the AMNH, including the type, were collected by G. K. and S. M. Cherrie at Maipures on the Rio Orinoco on 22 Jan 1899. They bear labels stamped "Venezuela"; Maipures, however, is on the Colombian side of the river. The male paratype (AMNH 476957) is more reddish dorsally than both the type and

TABLE 1

Measurements (mm) of *Chordeiles pusillus*, with range, mean and standard deviation. Measurements for males and females are combined for all populations except *esmeraldae* and *septentrionalis*

Population	No. of specimens	Wing chord	No. of specimens	Tail
<i>esmeraldae</i>				
males	11	120–127 (124.4) 2.2	11	72–78 (75.1) 2.0
females	11	122–130 (125.1) 3.4	11	70–75 (72.9) 1.8
<i>septentrionalis</i>				
males	8	120–128 (123.8) 3.2	6	61–68 (65.5) 2.4
females	4	121–125 (122.7)	4	65–69 (66.8)
<i>pusillus</i>				
Goias	4	132–139 (134.8)	4	75–79 (77.0)
Bahia	2	127 & 127	2	71 & 72
Subsp.				
Ceara	2	118 & 121		
<i>xerophilus</i>	2	129 & 132 (type)	2	72 & 72
<i>novaesi</i>	7	126–128 (126.7) 0.8	7	69–73 (70.7) 1.5
<i>saturatus</i>	5	130–139 (135.2) 3.3	5	76–80 (78.2) 1.6

6 specimens from Guyana with which it was directly compared, and in this respect is similar dorsally to the Marauhao subspecies (*novaesi*); but it is far less heavily barred ventrally, and has a darker breast-band.

Friedmann (1948) suggested that the Least Nighthawk may be migratory. If so, this would account for the specimen identified as *septentrionalis*, date not given and listed by Hellmayr in his original description, from Forte do Rio Branco [State of Acre]. I have not examined this specimen.

Chordeiles pusillus esmeraldae

Chordeiles pusillus esmeraldae Zimmer & Phelps, 1947, *Amer. Mus. Novit.* 133: 8. (Esmeralda, Territorio Amazonas, Venezuela.)

Diagnosis. Ventrally, entirely and heavily barred with black, including the undertail coverts; *saturatus* is equally heavily barred ventrally but has unbarred white undertail coverts. Dorsally feather edgings paler than in *saturatus*, being nearer dark Cinnamon Rufous (40) than Chestnut (32). Larger than *septentrionalis*, but smaller than *pusillus*.

Range. Central and southern Territorio Amazonas, Venezuela, southwards (at least occasionally) to Baioa, Rio Tocantins, Brazil. This subspecies undoubtedly occurs, but has not been reported, on the Colombian side of the Rio Negro at San Carlos.

Discussion. 33 specimens of the type series are now available in the AMNH, 23 of them collected in October 1928. They range from birds in worn and abraded plumage to others in the last stages of a complete moult, including young birds in late stages of the first prebasic moult (eg. AMNH 272526). One stub-tailed juvenile (AMNH 272545) was collected 9 Nov 1928. Three specimens of *esmeraldae* (Cabullita and Frontern, Bolivar, and Sanariapo, Amazonas) were wrongly listed as *septentrionalis* by Phelps & Phelps (1958)—see list of specimens examined below.

Specimens collected at Baioa, Rio Tocantins, Brazil on 1 Dec 1931 (AMNH 430372) and also 2 in the Museu Paraense Emilio Goeldi (MPEG 28590), one of them from "Rio Tracajutuba, Alesquerdo do Rio Araguari" (Município Amapa) in Amapa, collected 10 Jul 1969, the other (MPEG 32925) from "Mun. Ponta do Pedra. Fazenda Tucuma" on the island of Marajo, collected 8 Aug 1978 in coastal Para, are all *esmeraldae* (see arrows on map) and may be migrants; but they more likely indicate that the range of the subspecies extends to the coast south of the mouth of the Amazon River.

Chordeiles pusillus pusillus

Chordeiles pusillus Gould, 1861, *Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.*: 182. ("supposed to be from Bahia", Brazil).

Diagnosis. Similar to *septentrionalis* but slightly smaller (Table 1); and the belly is more extensively barred with sooty grey; the bars are somewhat wider.

Range. States of Bahia and Goias (Goyas). Reported from Sao Paulo (specimen not seen, cited by Hellmayr 1908).

Discussion. The holotype (BMNH 1861.11.11.179), "a skin of the well-known Bahia-make" (*vide* Hellmayr 1908) and 2 other specimens in the BMNH (88.8.1.55 and 88.8.1.56) labelled "Bahia, March 1880," from Dr Luschnath, are similar to one another (I. C. J. Galbraith, 14 May 1985). Another specimen (USNM 375749) apparently obtained as a mounted bird in "Recife," by "Lt E. W. Pfeiffer" in "1943" on examination is nominate *pusillus*, although Recife is within the range of *C. p. xerophilus* (q. v. below).

I. C. J. Galbraith kindly compared specimens in the BMNH with Gould's type of *C. pusillus*, and sent me the 3 specimens that were most similar in colour and pattern to the type, along with a description of minor differences. Two of these specimens represent the subspecies *septentrionalis* from Guyana (92.1.16.167 and 92.1.16.168), while the third (90.2.28.100) is from Fazenda, State of Goias. Also available is a specimen (AMNH 476956) from Rio Thesouras, State of Goias, which was annotated on the label by Hellmayr "compared with the type" and cited as being typical of *pusillus* (Hellmayr 1908). These Goias specimens, in pattern and colour, are generally like the 2 other specimens from "Bahia," and to the other specimens from Goias; but the specimens from Bahia are smaller than birds of the Goias population, although nevertheless still larger than *septentrionalis* (Table 1). When more specimens are available, the coastal population of *pusillus* may well be recognized as distinct.

I suggest that the type locality of *Chordeiles pusillus* Gould be restricted to Rio Thesouras, State of Goias, Brazil.

Chordeiles pusillus xerophilus, subsp. nov.

Holotype. "Male" [=female by plumage], USNM 264620, Santa Luiza, State of Paraiba, Brazil, collected 8 Jan 1927 by Emil Kaempfer, original number 4479.

Diagnosis. Palest of all the subspecies, being Tawny (38) to Antique Brown (37) on the upperparts; breast band and malar streak near Clay Color (123B). Dusky bars on belly region less distinct than in other subspecies; undertail coverts white without barring.

Range. Known so far only from the type and a formerly mounted specimen from "Bahia" (AMNH 5881) from the Verreaux Collection.

Discussion. The Bahia specimen from the Verreaux Collection, a taken-down mount, had been considered faded and bleached, but it is a near match for the type specimen, and indeed is little faded. Two specimens from "Northern Brazil, Ceara" collected by W. Jesse (BMNH 88.8.1.59 and 88.8.1.60) were examined, and are paler, greyer and smaller (wing chord 121, 118 mm) than specimens of *septentrionalis*, but have not the even paler and more buffy colour of *xerophilus*. When more specimens are available from northern Brazil, they may be found to represent an undescribed subspecies.

Etymology. The name *xerophilus* is from Greek, lover of arid regions (see plates 6–16 in Naumburg (1935) for illustrations of xeric coastal region in the States of Cera, Paraiba and Pernambuco).

***Chordeiles pusillus novaesi*, subsp. nov.**

Holotype. Adult female, AMNH 264620, Flores, State of Maranhao, Brazil, collected 1 Oct 1926 by Emil Kaempfer; original number 3774.

Diagnosis. The most richly coloured subspecies dorsally, with Brick Red (132A) to Chestnut (32) markings on sooty grey feathers (ie. darker coloured than *septentrionalis* and *pusillus*, but less dark than *saturatus*). Barring on undertail coverts weak or absent. Smaller than *pusillus* from Goias.

Range. Maranhao and adjacent Piauhy.

Etymology. It is a pleasure to name this subspecies for Dr Fernando C. Novaes of the Museu Paraense Emilio Goeldi, Belem, Brazil.

Chordeiles pusillus saturatus

Chordeiles pusillus saturatus Pinto & Camargo, 1957, *Pap. Av. Pet. Zool.* 8: 51–69. ("Sul do Para, al este do Tapajos"; description not seen.)

Diagnosis. Dorsally the most sooty coloured of all the subspecies, with dark cinnamon feather edgings; heavily barred ventrally, except for undertail coverts, which are white. Larger than *esmeraldae*.

Range. Southern Para (type locality, specimens not seen), and Mato Grosso.

SPECIMENS EXAMINED

C. p. septentrionalis (13). **Colombia:** Maipures, Rio Orinoco 2 (including type). **Venezuela:** Anzoategui, "Catawra" (= Cantaura) 1, *Estado Bolivar*, Peru-Callao 2, Sierra Imataca 1. **Guyana:** Annai 7.

C. p. esmeraldae (49). **Venezuela:** *Territorio Amazonas*, 34 specimens from the type series (including the type), San Carlos de Rio Negro 8, San Antonio, upper Rio Orinoco 1, Sanaripo 1; *Estado Bolivar*, Cabullita 1, "Las Frontera" (near Santa Elena) 1. **Brazil:** *Para*, Baiao, Rio Tocantins 1, "Mun. Ponta de Pedras, Fazenda Tucuna" (= island of Marajo) 1;

Amapa, "Rio Tracajutuba Alesquerdo do Rio Araguari, Mun. Amapa" 1.

C. p. pusillus (7). **Brazil**: "Bahia" 2; *Goiás*, 20 km N of Sao Joao de Alianca 2, Rio Thesouras 1, Fazenda 1; "Recife" (= error ?) 1.

[MPEG 14972, from Araguaucas, *Goiás*, not seen by the author, is undoubtedly the nominate subspecies.]

C. p. subsp. (2) **Brazil**; *Ceara*. 2.

C. p. xerophilus (2). **Brazil**: *Paraiba*, Santa Luiza 1 (type), "Bahia" 1.

C. p. novaesi (9). **Brazil**: *Maranhao*, Flores 7 (including type); *Piauhy*, Terezina 1, *Estremas* 1.

C. p. saturatus (6). **Brazil**: *Mato Grosso*, Chapada 4, Mutum Cavallo 2.

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The type-locality of *Alethe poliocephala* (Bonaparte)

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Alethe poliocephala was described by Bonaparte (1850: 262, s.n. *Trichophorus poliocephalus*) on the basis of an unrecorded number of specimens in the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, (RNH) Leiden, and with the somewhat indefinite type-locality "ex Afr. occ.". A few years later, more precise localities of the Leiden specimens began to appear in the literature: "Dabocrom: Pel.-Fernando Po: Mus. Lugdun." (Hartlaub 1857: 85). The next development was Reichenow's (1905: 746) definite